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ABSTRACT

Millions of school children are currently at risk of academic failure; the potential costs to society are staggering. If the central factors causing a child's poor social adjustment can be addressed, both the rate of school failure and social service costs can be reduced. Attempting to control the school failure issue, the Wisconsin State Legislature passed Chapter 118. This legislation mandates school systems to implement programs that assist children with their school problems. Based on the Chapter 118 imperatives, three Wisconsin counties implemented programs that join parents, the school, and the human service system together to help children at risk. The Marquette County program, begun in 1986, includes early intervention with children at risk, inhome family services, parental support, and coordination between involved adults. Currently 12 families are on the active case load; the average length of treatment is 6 months. The at-risk child's improvement in classroom behavior and in study habits are the main criteria for a successful outcome. Changes, frequently coming only in small doses, are seen as building blocks toward bonding the family, the child, and the school. The bibliography contains four references. (KM)

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EARLY INTERVENTION WITH CHILDREN AT RISK

MARQUETTE COUNTY'S STRATEGY TO INCREASE SCHOOL SUCCESS AND REDUCE SOCIAL SERVICE COST

October, 1988

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EA 021 495

Early Intervention with Children At Risk - Marquette County's Strategy to Increase School Success and Reduce Social Service Costs

Children-at-risk of failure in our public schools represent a significant social problem affecting both their own economic future and the economy of the nation. The unemployment rate of high school drop-outs is four times higher than for graduates. Two recent studies (Levin, 1972, and Catterall, 1985) indicate that the life-time earnings lost exceed $200,000 per student who drops out of school and $200 billion for each class of students across the United States. Social Service costs are substantially higher for persons who have not completed school, ranging from placement of juveniles in alternate care to welfare payments and medical assistance. The DHSS estimated that in November, 1987, 43% of AFDC parents in Wisconsin had not completed school. If the central factors causing a child's poor social adjustment can be addressed, then both rates of school failure and social service costs can be reduced.

The percentage of children-at-risk in our school systems seems to be increasing in recent years. About one-fourth of all students enrolled in school today will be drop-outs by the time their classes graduate. While millions of school children are at-risk of failure and the potential costs to society are staggering, the needs of the at-risk child have not been adequately addressed. Remedial programs, however,

may be cost effective. It is estimated (Levin, 1972) that for each dollar spent in effective remediation, about five dollars will be saved in long-term cost to society. For this reason a greater commitment of resources and funds seem practical. Approaches are currently available for helping children make better social adjustments. Thus, the objective of reducing rates of school failure should be attainable. The long-term cost benefits to society may make program funding more attractive.

Finding an Effective Program Strategy

Recently the Wisconsin State Legislature attempted to come to grips with the school failure issue by passing Chapter 118. This legislation mandates school systems to implement programs which assist children with their school problems. Bringing greater attention to the problems of these children has stimulated the search for a cure. Solutions within the school setting currently being discussed by policy makers include more individualized instruction, expansion of school social service and counselling staff, all day kindergarten for five year olds, and even proposals of kindergarten for four year olds.

However, strictly in-school solutions may not help some children as this approach tends to isolate the school system from outside resources which have additional potential for motivating children towards achievement. These strong resources are parents and the human service system.

If these three major forces in the lives of children,

namely, the schools, the parents, and the human service system, were to recognize their common interest, a very powerful coalition would be formed to ensure the child's development and success in school.

Based on the Chapter 118 imperatives three counties in Wisconsin have implemented programs for children-at-risk designed to build a bridge connecting parents, the school, and the human service system. Shawano County began it's program in 1985; Marquette County began in 1986. Sheboygan County also has a similar program for delinquents. The Marquette County approach will be described here. Key elements of this program include:

1. Early intervention with children-at-risk
2. In-home family services
3. Support for the parent
4. Coordination between involved adults

Early Intervention with Children at Risk

Children-at-risk are defined as those showing a persistent pattern of underachievement and problems adjusting socially in the school. Not only are these children failing their schoolwork they also frequently are behavior problems in the classroom or are passive and withdrawn in their interactions. The behavior correlates of these underachievers have a common underlying theme, that is, the child is unmotivated or too distracted to succeed in school.

Identification of the signs of poor school adjustment is relatively easy even at the lower grade levels. Teachers and

administrators observe failure in schoolwork as well as the inability of the child to adequately motivate himself to achieve in the school setting. Identifying these patterns early in the child's development is seen as essential for effective remediation before these patterns become thoroughly ingrained, predisposing the child to becoming a high school drop-out. One study conducted by the Wausau School District showed that patterns of underachievement identified in the third grade were significantly correlated with dropping out in high school.

Once the child is identified, the school refers the child for at-risk programming. In Marquette County children are identified in grades 3-8. A masters level social worker, trained in family services and supervised by a Ph.D. clinical psychologist, then enters the family home and begins the process of problem solving with the family.

In-home Family Services

The child-at-risk social worker makes outreach contacts with the parents seeking their agreement to participate in the program. Once the family consents to services, the social worker meets with the family in their home at least weekly and more often in times of crisis. Utilizing psychological and family systems principles of behavior change, the social worker makes an assessment and develops a case plan outlining the goals and approaches to problem solving. In performing this task the social worker incorporates information from a variety of sources including

administrators, teachers, parents, siblings, and sometimes grandparents.

The case planning must be tailored to the child's needs to be effective. Such individualization is especially necessary for children showing social adjustment problems as limit testing and emotional reactions on the part of the child require a variety of responses from the adult to keep the child on track. This fine tuning of adult responses is essential to progress.

The individualized case plan defines the child's problems in social/emotional terms and attempts to identify familial issues contributing to the behavior problem. Educators have long suspected that the problems observed in school are directly connected to problems in the child's home. Thus interventions within the family itself may be a prerequisite for constructive change in the child. Support for this view comes from our observations that the patterns of conflict between child and teacher also frequently are noted between child and parent.

Twelve families are on the active case load. The average length of treatment is about six months.

Support for the Parent

Children-at-risk frequently have parents who offer inadequate or misguided parenting. These parents may feel alienated from institutions of society such as the school. Parents may be overwhelmed by their own personal problems to the extent that they cannot adequately nurture the

development of their children. Nevertheless, it is sensible to include the parents due to the child's dependency and immaturity. Recognizing that parents are the primary agent for change in the child, the social worker encourages and guides the parents giving them a greater sense of self-esteem and confidence in their parenting role.

Coordination Between Involved Adults

The child-at-risk program in Marquette County has a primary aim of linking the schools, parents, and human service system together to attain mutual goals. The child-at-risk social worker is the key to that link. Through his relationships with family members, the social worker encourages parents to support the school objectives and vice versa. The mutual case plan enables the school to further individualize it's educational program. It also permits and encourages utilization of other community resources, e.g., AODA, social services, JTPA, etc., in working with the family on addressing the identified problems.

On a weekly basis representatives from the school (principals and guidance staff), representatives from mental health (Unified Services Board Director and Guidance Center Director), the Director of Social Services, and the child-at-risk social worker meet to coordinate case planning for involved families. Prior parental consent allows exchange of confidential information at these meetings. In Marquette County two primary school districts are served through this program, Montello and Westfield.

Evaluation and Results

There are several means by which evaluation of the effectiveness of this program can be made including acceptance by the various agencies funding the program and by observation of change in achievement and behaviors in the child.

The school districts have expressed appreciation for the continued cooperation of the human services system. They value having trained experts to turn to who can respond during times when problems arise in the school setting.

The schools may observe changes in the parenting. They may see more active involvement on the part of the parents through increased communications with the school, through acknowledgment of successful completion of assignments, through concern expressed when the child experiences a problem. For the first time some parents attend a parent teacher conference or offer some indication of appreciation to the teacher. Interest on the part of the parent in a child's school life can motivate the student towards achievement.

Improvement in classroom behavior and improvement in study habits are the main criteria for successful outcome. In the classroom, students may show increased attentiveness, form new friendships, or make positive classroom responses to questions. However, these results may come in small doses. Changes are seen as building blocks towards bonding the family, the child, and the school.

Funding

The Department of Social Services, Unified Services Board, Westfield School District, and the Montello School District, share the cost of this program. A grant from DHSS for family based services provided the major share for the first two years of this program's existence in Marquette County.

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